

VZCZCXRO2268  
OO RUEHAG RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHKUK  
DE RUEHLB #2814/01 2421453  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
O 301453Z AUG 06  
FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 5346  
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
RHMFISS/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY  
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY  
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC PRIORITY  
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO PRIORITY 0207  
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 1059

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 002814

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/MARCHESE/HARDING

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/30/2016

TAGS: [PREL](#) [MOPS](#) [PTER](#) [LE](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: LAF CHIEF CLAIMS ARMY IS IN CONTROL OF  
BORDER

Classified By: Jeffrey D. Feltman, Ambassador. Reason 1.4(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

-----

1. (C) During an August 30 meeting with the Ambassador, DATT, and poloff, a very defensive and somewhat brusque Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) commander General Michel Sleiman, maintaining a straight face, gave the preposterous claim that the LAF has established a "watertight" cordon along the border with Syria. He said that the Lebanese require technical support along the border, as well as UN naval support along the coastline. Pressed by the Ambassador on the arms smuggling issue, Sleiman said the LAF has clear orders to interdict all smuggling, but that they have not publicized their successes out of sensitivity to local political concerns. Sleiman complained that the LAF is being falsely criticized in the Lebanese press for allowing Hizballah arms shipments to pass through LAF checkpoints. The Ambassador urged Sleiman and his staff to brief military attaches on measures taken to date as well as success stories with arms interdictions, and asked how the U.S. should share information on potential arms shipments, if such information were available. END SUMMARY.

CLAIMS THE LAF IS CAPABLE

-----

2. (C) The Ambassador opened the meeting by asking for information on arms smuggling and LAF coordination with the international community on border security and security assistance. Sleiman, ignoring these specific queries, launched into a diatribe on why the LAF is capable of stopping arms smuggling on its own, with minimal international support. To begin with, he said the LAF has 60 positions at smaller ports along the Lebanese coastline, adding that they have five working radars for the coast, and need an additional ten. Sleiman claims that the LAF would be responsible for a band stretching 8-10 miles off the coast, while UNIFIL naval forces would patrol beyond this (and forewarn the Lebanese of any suspect vessels). Queried by the Ambassador, Sleiman confirmed that he supported UNIFIL maritime assets.

3. (C) Pulling out a pile of maps, which he presumably thought would help verify his claims, Sleiman assured the Ambassador that 8600 LAF troops have deployed along the 380-kilometer Lebanese-Syrian border, and that "watertight"

measures are in place to stop arms smuggling. "The border has checkpoints and intelligence," trumpeted Sleiman, pointing out little dots on the maps to indicate the checkpoints, "Who can do better than this?" Sleiman said that, in deploying to the border, the LAF had been forced to leave most of the Bekaa Valley and parts of northern Lebanon bare of troops. He claimed that Internal Security Forces commander Ashraf Rifi had promised to move 1000 troops into this zone, but has not yet done so.

¶4. (C) Sleiman noted that many of the 8600 troops on the border could redeploy to this bare zone once the LAF receives "technical support" -- presumably from Germany -- for monitoring the border. The Ambassador asked how the USG might share any information we might come across on suspected arms smuggling, in order for the LAF to take action. Not overly-enthusiastic, Sleiman agreed that this would be a useful arrangement for the LAF.

NEEDS FULL IDF WITHDRAWAL SOON  
-----

¶5. (C) Sleiman said that the LAF would deploy up to the Blue Line on 8/30 in the area of Sheba'a village. Claiming that it is his understanding that the IDF intends to remain in Lebanese territory until November, Sleiman urged that the full IDF withdrawal take place as soon as the first significant UNIFIL augmentation contingent -- Sleiman mentioned 3000 additional troops -- is in place in the South. The longer the Israeli withdrawal takes, according to Sleiman, the more chance there is that the LAF deployment will lose its momentum and Hizballah's commitment to playing a constructive role will weaken.

BEIRUT 00002814 002 OF 003

¶6. (C) Sleiman added that the Lebanese expect Israel to withdraw from areas he claimed to be within Lebanon proper -- Jabal Sammak and Ruus Peak near the Blue Line above Sheba'a Farms and the northern part of the town of Ghajar. Israel occupied the first two sites well before the recent hostilities, but the occupation of the northern part of Ghajar was more recent and included earthen berms and concrete barriers (connecting the northern part of the town, inside Lebanon, with the main part of town in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights). UNIFIL Commander Alain Pelligrini apparently told Sleiman that the first two (sites of Israeli radar stations) fall within the disputed Sheba'a Farms area, though Pelligrini suggested that UNIFIL could deploy in the northern half of Ghajar. (Comment: While we did not pursue this topic with Sleiman, he made a revealing comment. He referred to the Blue Line in the Shebaa Farms areas as "the old Syrian-Lebanese border," suggesting that, in his interpretation, Shebaa Farms was, as the UN argued, Syrian territory. But he also argued that the two IDF bases were inside Lebanon, not part of Shebaa Farms, suggesting that he did not consider the Blue Line drawn in May 2000 by the UN to conform with the old Syrian-Lebanese border. End comment.)

BEMOANS MEDIA SMEAR CAMPAIGN  
-----

¶7. (C) The Ambassador recommended Sleiman set up a briefing for interested foreign military attaches to hear about progress in the LAF deployment as well as purported successes in blocking arms supply. Without concrete information, suggested the Ambassador, there is the Israelis can be convinced to lift the blockade on Lebanon. Without comprehensive formal briefings, foreign embassies are guided only by publicly available information in the Lebanese press, which, as Sleiman himself had noted, is often inaccurate. The Ambassador criticized Sleiman's recent "order of the day" directing the LAF to deploy "side-by-side with the resistance" in the South, saying that it is exactly this kind of statement which leaves the international community --

particularly Israel -- with little confidence in the LAF's seriousness and commitment to its mission.

¶8. (C) Sleiman defended his statement feebly, saying it was intended for his Shi'a troops to "feel that they can deploy near their families in the South without hostility." Sleiman claimed that he is the subject of a media smear campaign against him. He mentioned for instance a recent story, which he said was concocted, that the LAF had knowingly ignored a truck full of weapons destined for Hizballah. "I have forty years of service in the LAF," said Sleiman, "I am not going to start lying in my last year of service."

¶9. (C) Sleiman assured the Ambassador that the LAF had in fact stopped several illicit arms shipments, mostly being transported from point to point within the country and not from Syria - "I do not think the Syrians are sending weapons now." All the more reason, pressed the Ambassador, for the LAF to quietly brief embassies on its accomplishments, to ensure they have correct information and aren't relying solely on -- supposedly -- false information in the public domain. With this information, shared privately, perhaps the USG could advocate more on the GOL's behalf in order to get the blockade lifted. Sleiman did not seem to appreciate the logic of this, nor indeed how deeply damaging his "order of the day" had been to the prospects of the blockade ending soon.

COMMENT

-----

¶10. (C) Sleiman has overseen a truly historic process -- the deployment of the LAF to the south after an absence of nearly 40 years. Yet, today, Sleiman offered a distinctly lacklustre and slapdash performance that fell far short of giving us any credible assurances that the LAF is fully in control of the border with Syria. Coming across as blustery and overly-sensitive, Sleiman seemed often on the verge of outright accusing us of orchestrating the media campaign against him. He does not seem to appreciate the impact of

BEIRUT 00002814 003 OF 003

his public comments on the Israeli willingness to lift the blockade, nor the usefulness of privately sharing with us the LAF's successes in interdicting weapons shipments. Unfortunately, Sleiman serves at the pleasure of the Lebanese President, and until such time as that larger issue is resolved, we will have to suffer him. END COMMENT  
FELTMAN